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ABSTRACT

One of the primary principles of Readers Theater is to "dramatize" literature in classroom performance and to provide a visual and oral stimulus to students who are unaccustomed to using imagination to appreciate literary texts. Readers Theater may be used to enhance the critical study of language; to explore author meaning or point of view; to promote reading, writing, and listening skills; and to display creative talents of student performers. This paper discusses selected conventions of Readers Theater and gives a performance blueprint. It also presents selected exercises, developed in introduction to literature classes for non-majors, which should provide an excellent foundation to support further creative exploration by interested instructors. It notes that the exercises are framed as participatory activities to stimulate awareness of basic Readers Theater principles of classroom performance, and are intended to promote a classroom atmosphere of relaxed inquiry and "risk-free" role-playing. Exercises presented in the paper are entitled: "Vocal" Special Effects; X-Files: Three Characters in Search of an Alien Author; and You Are There. (NKA)

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Readers Theatre: An Introduction to Classroom Performance

by Gerald Lee Ratliff

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

"Readers Theatre: An Introduction to Classroom Performance"

> "My characters are assembled from past and present stages of civilization...bits from books and even newspapers; scraps of humanity, ragged and tattered pieces patched together as is the human soul."
>
> --August Strindberg, Diary

One of the primary principles of Readers Theatre is to "dramatize" literature in classroom performance and to provide a visual and oral stimulus to students who are unaccustomed to using imagination to appreciate literary texts. This "theatrical mind" approach to the interpretation and subsequent performance of literary texts relies on the basic viewpoint that to see literature is as relevant to give life and meaning as to read literature.

Basic Approach

There are a number of ways to use Readers Theatre in the literature classroom. Readers Theatre may be used to enhance the critical study of language; to explore author meaning or point of view; to promote reading, writing and listening skills; and to display creative talents of student performers. For the most part, however, today's Readers

Theatre is concerned with the inherent theatricality of literature; particularly the role that sights, sounds and words can play in the interpretation of a literary text.

Selected Conventions

Although Readers Theatre is part of traditional theatre movements that seek to "stage" the actions, attitudes and emotions of literary characters sketched by an author, there are selected conventions that clearly distinguish Readers Theatre from more typical theatre classroom activities. For example, in Readers Theatre a student's vocal response (s) and physical action (s) is directed forward, full-front, to visualize what is being described in the literature. In addition, a single performer in Readers Theatre may play a variety of roles in classroom performance or serve as a narrator figure who provides narration and transition for the scripted literature.

Student performers may either hold their scripts or place them on reading stands. They may stand in line facing the audience or sit on stools or chairs; and there may be combinations of sitting and standing. Student performers usually remain in the classroom playing space throughout the scripted performance, and may have individual lines of dialogue or share lines with other performers. Student performers may also wear suggestive costumes and make-up; or they may wear their own clothing.

The classroom staging of literature in Readers Theatre may include a traditional elevated stage or the playing space may be arranged in-the-round, semicircle or three-quarter round. Classroom staging may even include accessories like ramps, platforms or a backdrop depicting a painted setting. Other staging accessories that may be used to

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dramatize the classroom performance of literature are lighting, sound, recorded music, choreographed movement or slides and projections.

There is an increasing trend in Readers Theatre today to stage literature in "found" spaces. Found spaces move literary texts to an actual locale that suggests the setting described by the author and become playing spaces for the dramatic action described in the literature. For example, Edwin Markham's "The Man with the Hoe" is staged in an abandoned field or Wallace Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is staged in a music recital hall.

Performance Blueprint

The range of literature available in Readers Theatre is limited only by the imagination needed to give novels, poems, short stories, song lyrics, letters or diaries a theatrical class- room performance. An essential ingredient in the classroom performance blueprint, therefore, is for student performers to read literary texts with a critical eye to grasp the subtle suggestions of character implied in the story line. Student performers should read a literary text as he/she might read a novel or short story; initially sorting out narrative descriptions or relationships and allowing the "story" to tell itself in specific character action (s) or movement (s). If possible, the literary text should be read in one sitting to sense the momentum and inevitable build to a climax suggested in the arrangement of episodes. Particular attention should also be paid to the author's description of scenic elements that might help visualize the locale in classroom performance.

A second reading of the literary text should be more analytical than the first and focus on clarity and comprehension. Student performers should critically evaluate a character's interaction with others and anticipate potential classroom performance reactions or responses. The more objective second reading should also be enriched with active classroom discussion and written portrait sketches that isolate specific action (s) or movement (s) needed to fill in the author's incomplete character outline with inventive self-expression.

It may also be useful for student performers to cultivate a mental symbol that helps to clearly define a tentative character. A mental symbol indicates the character's ultimate desire, what actions the character is willing to commit to achieve the desire and the price that must be paid for pursuing the desire. In isolating a character's primary motivation, it is important to assign a specific "name" to the desire. Naming a character's desire encourages an illustrative approach to classroom performance and student performers are better able to be active role-players armed with a stronger sense of a character's intellectual and emotional point of view.

Selected Exercises

Of course, no simple classroom performance blueprint exists for predicting the degree of success a student performer might achieve in role-playing. The following exercises, developed in introduction to literature classes for non-majors, should provide an excellent foundation to support further creative exploration by interested instructors. Each instructor should approach the exercises in a manner that is compatible with an individual

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style of presentation; and each instructor is encouraged to take the liberty of adapting, modifying or extending the basic classroom performance techniques suggested to meet individual assignments. The exercises are framed as participatory activities to stimulate awareness of basic Readers Theatre principles of classroom performance, and are intended to promote a classroom atmosphere of relaxed inquiry and "risk-free" role-playing.

Exercise: "Vocal" Special Effects

Objective: To explore the properties of sound and the role that "vocal" special effects might play in the classroom interpretation of a literary text.

Approach: Stockpile a variety of hand-held items capable of conducting the sounds of the human voice. Examples might include cardboard tubes, garden hoses, soda cans, plastic jugs, mouth mufflers, combs, vacuum cleaner attachments, scuba masks and glass containers.

Begin the exercise by having the performers present their found objects individually to the class. Each performer uses the found object as a mouthpiece to produce an interesting sound. Present each performer with a familiar line of verse, prose phrase or witty quotation to voice with the found object. (Sources might include Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, book titles, song lyrics, television programs or well-known quotations from William Shakespeare, Abraham Lincoln or Benjamin Franklin.)

For example, the familiar line of verse may be William Shakespeare's "Come what come may, Time and the hour runs through the roughest day." (Macbeth, I, iii); the prose phase may be Mark Twain's humorous suggestion that "...familiarity breeds contempt, and children"; or the witty quotation may be Oscar Wilde's "I can resist everything except temptation." (Lady Windemere's Fan, I, i.)

After the performers have been given individual opportunities to demonstrate a found object and to voice a familiar line of verse, prose phrase or witty quotation, repeat the exercise without the found object. Each performer is now encouraged to duplicate the sound produced by the found object with the natural voice; and to create as many "vocal" special effects as possible. Following the individual presentations, there should be active discussion and evaluation of the role that sound might play in voicing the attitude and mood of literary characters.

Extension: The exercise may be extended as a small group project that focuses on "vocal" special effects in literary texts that contain descriptive character actions and long narrative passages as well. Examples of literary texts appropriate for this part of the exercise may include Albert Camus' The Stranger, Antoine de Saint Exupery's The Little Prince, Roald Dahl's James and the Giant Peach or Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea.

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Exercise . : X Files: Three Characters in Search of an Alien Author

Objective: To acquaint performers with the role that critical analysis plays in classroom performance.

Approach: Begin the exercise with a critical analysis of a selected literary text featuring three characters and an author's persona. The analysis should be sufficiently detailed to indicate character relationships and the author's apparent point of view or theme. The literary text should also be cut or edited to a fifteen minute classroom performance.

In the first part of the exercise, place several chairs and tables or desks in different areas of the playing space. Prepare four written slips of paper that read "author" and the individual names of each "character" named in the selected literature. Each performer draws a folded slip of paper, moves to a table or desk and sits. No performer is permitted to know the identity of any other performer at this time. Performers may move to different locations and join other characters at tables or desks as the exercise moves forward.

Ask a member of the audience to choose an exciting event or incident in the literary text that may stimulate the initial discussion. Each performer then responds to the question in the voice of the author, narrator, and characters--without revealing their identity. The object of the exercise is to rely solely on the literary text, and to direct responses to the implicit or explicit evidence suggested in the literature. Any disagreements in interpretation should be resolved with a reference to character action, dialogue, or narration.

There should also be an impartial moderator, or Narrator figure, who solicits questions from the audience to clarify the performer's interpretation of the literary text. Questions may be directed to a character's intention or motivation, author's point of view, theme, imagery, and choice of locale or setting. Questions may also be directed to performance approaches, staging techniques, or movement patterns that might be useful in visualizing the literary text.

It is important in the question part of the exercise that performers recognize each other's identity without any acknowledgement to the audience. It is also Important that performers respond to questions within the context of what a critical analysis of the literature suggests. The exercise ends when the moderator determines, at periodic intervals, that a majority of the audience clearly identifies the "author." Finally, each performer reveals the role they have played in the exercise.

Extension: Extend the exercise with other performers in small-groups assigned different literary texts for analysis and audience questions. Or, use the responses to audience questions as an improvisation to flesh-out character relationships,

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clarify apparent author point of view, and determine a production metaphor for classroom performance.

Some good examples of literature that lends itself to analysis, audience questions, and improvisation in a limited time frame may include the "young King Arthur's education" excerpt in T. H. White's The Sword in the Stone, the "tea party" episode in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, and the insurance money quarrel" scene in Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun II, i).

Exercise : You Are There

Objective: To acquaint performers with the role of historical research in role-playing.

Approach: Divide performers into small-groups of five, and distribute a poetry or prose selection that suggests a specific historical period. Performers are instructed to search outside the literature to learn about predominant attitudes, social mores, daily habits, and dress of the selected period.

The historical research should focus on examples of customs and manners that reflect another time and another place. The studies should also complement an anlysis of the historical description in the selected literature. In a study of Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, for example, performers may focus on the daily routine of a feudal estate, appropriate choice of clothes to suggest a character's social status, or experiment with voicing unfamiliar phrases like "smale foweles" or "up roos the sonne."

The second part of the exercise is classroom performance of the literature that includes historical research in role-playing. Performers should integrate daily routines, dress or habits, mannerisms, and historical traits that capture the spirit of the times. There should also be some attention paid to the use of historical props, set pieces, or small scenic units in the staging of the literature for classroom performance.

Extension: The exercise may be extended to include interdisciplinary approaches to historical research as well. For example, alliances with art, music, social studies and history can result in "You Are There" projects that recreate selected historical periods in classroom performance. Participants may contribute authentic music, scenic art, case studies, informative hand-outs, and inventive staging to the collaborative project.

There are a number of literary texts, in addition to Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, that lend themselves to interdisciplinary projects. The epic narratives of Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels or James Joyce's Ulysses are familiar historical travelogues; and there are popular Arthurian legends like Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Idylls of the King" or Mark Twain's satirical A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.

Some other literary texts that feature historical customs and manners may include Charles Dickens The Pickwick Papers, Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio and George Bernard Shaw's Androcles and the Lion. There are also good adventure narratives like Daniel DeFoe's Foe's Moll Flanders, Henry Fielding's Tom Jones, and Herman Melville's Billy Budd that are likely prospects for interdisciplinary classroom collaboration.

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